

“Where memory is, theatre is.”¹ : An Introduction by Steve Burch

In the late summer of 2011, having dealt with the damage done to his home from the April 27 2011 tornado, Michael Carr came to me and began to talk about needing to find some closure, both for himself and for the community. He felt then, and now, that the community needed what live theatre can offer: a re-bonding, and a sense of our being a single community, that we are our neighbors, our families, and ourselves. That the terrible destruction wrought that late afternoon to West Alabama had seared our very souls, as, indeed, it had.

Michael sought me out initially to talk out how we could create through our collective art something to give to our town, a gift of the humanity that theatre has as it lives in rooms where performers and spectators get together and experience together stories played out in real time.

I am a theatre historian at the University of Alabama. Every other year in addition to my seminars I teach playwriting, and occasionally write them as well. Normally at the beginning of the semester I pass out a dozen or so photos (along with some photos of paintings or cartoons) and my students will blindly take one each. Then having them open their photos to see them for the first time, I then give them their assignment: to find, or create, the story in the photo. (I remind them that the story may be occurring off camera.) Finding the story becomes the key to the kind of play each of them will ultimately write. This helps them focus on the questions that every dramatist must ask and subsequently answer: what is the play’s focus, whose play is it, what is the inciting incident, what are the obstacles, what are the stakes for the “protagonist,” what will the tone be, in which style will it be told, what is the purpose to my telling this story? Unless the photograph spells it out, I try to get them not to intrude on the action of the photo with an ending already prescribed. Comedy, tragedy, melodrama, romance, musical, absurdist, realistic, symbolic, epic in scale or intimate in tone, Brechtian

¹ The Audience. Herbert Blau.

or Beckettian, sci-fi or fantasy, I give each student free rein to approach their involuntary subject in whatever form appeals to them, both intellectually and instinctually, and to their individual sense of the theatre.

For this particular class, in January 2012, I asked my students, using a photo of a child staring at the post-tornado rubble, to create a ten-minute play from that photo. There were to be no barriers in style, subject, tone, theme, language, characters. There is no one single narrative and there is no one single tornado narrative, only thousands as each of us who lived through that hellish late afternoon has our own story and experience. (As the man said, many decades ago, 'there are eight million stories in the naked city;' well, in Tuscaloosa we've many thousands of them.)

21 students submitted twenty-one plays. Some were funny, some were sad, some were angry, some were hopeful. Some were auto-biographical, some were pure fiction. All were truthful. We selected nine of these plays, and a tenth from an old friend and alumnus of UA's theatre program. We offered them to our spectators, who had their own memories, their own stories, their own moments of terror and trauma to relive. We offer them to you, the reader.

The ten plays within are presented in the order in which they were performed. Michael Carr determined the order. He found that of the ten, five were concerned with events occurring both before, during, and immediately following the actual storm. The remaining five concerned more of the long-term after-effects and this provided a convenient transition in the performance. Suffice to say that the first act had the most immediate effect on some of our audiences, what with sirens going off and recordings of the actual news and weather reports as they occurred, and the likelihood of deaths to some of the characters (especially *Man in Black* and *Future Perfect*) causing the reliving of a traumatic memory for a few. (We had a Red Cross counselor on hand to assist any in need.)

Theatre has seemingly always been a focus of communities in crisis, sometimes comforting the bereaved (*Our Town* during the Great Depression, *The Guys* following the 9-11 attacks), sometimes agitating them (*The Plough and the Stars* shortly after the Irish Civil War and a mere ten years after the Easter Uprising). The way theatre creates a community of spectators sharing a room in real time allows and spurs the group and its individuals to see themselves, their stories, and their concerns reflected back at them, (and to encourage each audience member to attempt to see the world through the eyes of various characters outside of themselves) provides the community with a unique and simultaneously quotidian opportunity for healing. In his seminal classic, *From Ritual to Theatre*, the great anthropologist Victor Turner found that many groups, both large and small, complex and fairly basic in their structures, experience a similar response to crisis, one that can be seen even in its most basic form as performative.

He referred to these moments of strife as “social dramas – dramas of living.” Each social unit, no matter how small, will experience a series of phases (four of them) beginning with the first manifesting itself as the *breach*, or rupture, to the status quo. If this breach to the norm goes unresolved, it will in no time progress into a *crisis* which cannot be ignored by the community. Then *redressive* steps are taken, usually from some social group of accepted authority within the community, be it legislative, military, or religious (but not exclusively these groups only). Turner explained that these redressive means, or mechanisms could range from personal advice all the way to formal legal machinery and, in larger public crises, to what he saw as a performance of public rituals, such as trials (e.g., the trials of the police officers in L.A. accused of beating Rodney King) and impeachments (e.g., against President Bill Clinton). Turner cited the Dreyfuss Case in 1890s France and the Watergate crisis in the mid 1970s as examples of large-scale social dramas. Once redressive steps are taken, the fourth and final phase is entered: either *reintegration* of person[s] back into the community so that it may re-

heal itself. Or there is a *consensual recognition* among the community that the schism cannot and will not be repaired.

Not all social dramas are political in nature. The tornados that touched down in Tuscaloosa and across Alabama on April 27, 2011 sped from breach to crisis in approximately eighteen minutes, destroying lives and property and seriously damaging a social fabric which was unprepared for the scope of the emergency. The authoritative agencies – those which remained largely undamaged – threw themselves into a furious action to assess, dig out, count the dead, and provide immediate medical assistance for the injured. But in a crisis of this magnitude, the agencies alone were not enough, and Tuscaloosans came together in the thousands to transport food and water to the rescuers, broken bodies to hospitals, homeless men, women and children to shelters. All were traumatized, all were afflicted, victims, survivors, and rescuers alike.

Narratives are created from person to person, either from persons who experienced the event, providing an insider's view, or from outsiders looking in, bringing shape to the story. Narratives provide the reader and spectator with an interpretation of the event and give an appearance of order and a sense of what led up to the crisis, and what redressive means were utilized to contain the emergency and to restore what can be restored, and to accept what cannot. The rituals of grieving for the dead, for the loss of home, for the perhaps greater loss to the community's sense of normalcy, began immediately and continue to this day. Turner's social drama model is surprisingly close to the Aristotelian model for tragedy and what most practitioners of playwriting understand as the classic structure of the play: begin with the inciting incident (the breach), ratchet up the stakes through a series of events that push the inciting incident into a full-blown crisis, create a series of obstacles to the resolution of the crisis, and through the play's authority figures bring the narrative to a closure that satisfies and feels complete.

The ten scripts which form the structure of *Inside the Tornado* are a small part of this community's social drama ritual. The first play, *Home* by Paul B. Crook, is a theatricalized look at a former Tuscaloosan's (the Ex-Patriot) watching the drama play out in internet news broadcasts. The play also requires a group of dancers, each one dancing a basic element – wind, water, fire, earth - to 'create' the storm onstage. This is followed by *The Man in Black* by Amanda Stevens. In this piece, a widow watches the growing storm with alarm, especially as it was an earlier storm that took the life of her husband and daughter's father. She insists on playing down the similarities of the two storms and attempts to reassure her scared daughter that only when 'the man in black' is seen will they be in real danger, a fairy-tale with real-life consequences.

Dorm Life by Tyler Spindler records the tornado's immediate after effects on a group of students in the powerless dorm room, playing cards, and trying to maintain their sanity through silly and occasionally cruel humor. In *Future Perfect* by Jake Kinstler, a couple of lovers reaches a crisis point in their already fragile relationship just as the tornado hits. And *Lost Penny* by Jessica Knight, with engaging humor and sadness, follows one victim's falling through the cracks of the social safety net.

The second act begins with *The Lesson* by John Nara in which a playwriting student tries to avoid writing about the tornado because he did not personally experience it while his teacher, a middle-aged woman with health concerns, forcefully defends the creative process. *Wreckage* by Jeff Horger autobiographically records his experience of walking through devastated communities with his chain saw, unable to get back to his 'old' life.

Peyton Conley's *April* presents a bracingly argued conflict between a photojournalist providing a service to the survivors even as he advances his career and a young mother who cannot reconcile her grief with her monetary gain. *Video Diary* by Jimmy Kontos movingly traces a survivor's account of his experience with the trauma of being a survivor. And Adam Pickens' *Rubble* ends the group of plays as it

looks at three men viewing the emptiness of a portion of the city with their memories of what was and their vision of what it could now become. These plays are the skeletal links for *Inside the Tornado*, a mosaic of characters and events, of ideas and arguments, of sights and sounds, of gains and losses.

When putting this event together, I was reminded of Anne Nelson's superb play, *The Guys*, which premiered in December 2001. With the country, and especially New York City, still highly traumatized after the 9-11 attacks, Nelson's play sought nothing else but to bring a sense of closure and healing to her community in deep crisis. Her story of a professional writer who is asked to help a fire chief in putting together the many eulogies he must give following the deaths of so many firefighters in his precinct touched on the inchoate agony of many in the audience. Perhaps the fact that her play had the services of Sigourney Weaver and Bill Murray as the writer and fire chief helped bring in audiences, but the word of mouth on the street was extraordinary and audiences flocked to a small off-off Broadway theatre to experience its collective grieving and healing.

The collaboration between Shelton State College (our producer and source for many of the actors, technicians and crew) and the University of Alabama (source for the scripts, a couple of the actors and directors) engendered much good will among the cast and crew. The reactions from our audiences were heartening as well. Already one of these plays is being looked at by our local Red Cross as a future teaching tool for rescuers. Theatre is about building and speaking to a community; it is also about memory, about recreating what and who are no longer there, with the language of speech and of moving forms and bodies. We hope that these plays serve our purpose to audiences and to readers, not to relive a nightmare for some (though that might happen), but to come to terms with our losses and celebrate our inter-connectedness. We are one. We are all Tuscaloosans. We will prevail.

Steve Burch

Inside the Tornado performance

Plays compiled by Michael Carr of the Fine Arts Division at Shelton State College, and Steve Burch from the playwriting class of Prof. Burch at the University of Alabama, Spring 2012, and from Paul B. Crook and Berteal (Kim and Chad Gentry). Performances took place May 3-5, 2012.

Program:

Act One

Home by Paul B. Crook; performers: Charles Prosser, Shelton State Dancers; director: Michael Carr

The Man in Black by Amanda Stevens; performers: Margaret Carr, Susie Johnson, Shelton State Dancers; director: Michael Carr

Dorm Life by Tyler Spindler; performers: George Aycock, Ale Bowman, Trey Huebner, Jordan Kirkley; director: Michael Carr

Future Perfect by Jake Kinstler; performers: Adam Miller, Stacy Panitch; director: Michael Carr

Lost Penny by Jessica Knight; performers: Jessica Knight, Charles Barkley, Chris Harding, Molly Page, Deborah Parker, Sean Randall, Wylie Walker, Wescott Youngson; director: Michael Carr

"I've Been in the Storm Too Long" (spiritual sung by Abe Fields)

Act Two

The Lesson by John Nara; performers: Charles Barkley, Deborah Parker; director: Steve Burch

Wreckage by Jeff Horger; performers: Nic Helms, Jasmine Wade; director: Michael Carr

April by Peyton Conley; performers: Chris Harding, Molly Page, Wylie Walker; director: Tommy Walker

Video Diary by Jimmy Kontos; performers: Ben Mitchell, Natalie Riegel; director: John Nara

Rubble by Adam Pickens; performers: James Wesley Glass, Sean Randall, Wescott Youngson; director: Michael Carr

"Bama Song" written and performed by Berteal (Kim & Chad Gentry)